The Northern Yukon Research Programme: Highlights of 1978 Field Work

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The Northern Yukon Research Programme completed its fourth season of field research the end of August, with the return to Toronto of the last crew working in the Old Crow region. In some respects this has been one of the most productive field seasons, inasmuch as one of the objectives of highest priority was attained not once but five times: this is the excavation of artefacts from deposits of unquestionable Pleistocene age. Some of the other results are likely to prove as interesting over the longer term, but for the present, of greatest immediate significance is the fact that we found and were able to excavate fluvial deposits containing bone artefacts that lie well below layers dated by ^{14}C to $>$ 50,000 years at Old Crow River Locality 11, and in similar though not identical stratigraphic position at OCR Locs. 300, 12, and 15. These observations have recently been confirmed by R.E. Morlan at Loc. 15, who with J. Matthews is responsible for the radiocarbon date at OCR 11.

The fifth site in which Pleistocene stratigraphy was excavated is Bluefish Cave overlooking Bluefish Basin near Old Crow. Here the excavations revealed at least five flakes of chert and a hearth, which confirm the presence of Man. This had been suggested by results of earlier tests, which had yielded Pleistocene horse bones fractured while fresh. There is no clear indication of the age of these remains at present.

These results mean that for the first time we can look forward with assurance to dating very early manifestations of human activity in the only

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large unglaciated part of Canada known to have been visited by Man during the Pleistocene. Recent advances in the instrumentation of radiocarbon dating raise the theoretical possibility of extending the effectiveness of this technique from 50,000 years to as much as 100,000 years. Physicists at the University of Toronto are taking a leading part in the development of this technique, and it is to be hoped that within a very few years it will be possible to date these, and other, very early archaeological sites with the same, or greater, precision as is now possible with much younger material.

These developments are of utmost importance and very widespread interest among those concerned with the prehistory of Man in the Western Hemisphere: heretofor, until very recently few would credit a beginning date more than 15,000 years ago, and most would have expressed extreme caution - if not downright disbelief - when confronted with a date older than 30,000 years. Only last year (1977) the first radiocarbon dates suggesting an age of more than 41,000 were published by R.E. Morlan; now we must contemplate artefacts much older than this. Because of these rapidly changing data, our new evidence, which appears to define a hiatus in our knowledge elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere of at least 30,000 years duration, is likely to prove unsettling; and quite possibly controversial, until the findings have been presented in full. Further excavations are planned for the summer of 1979.

The Northern Yukon Research Programme is a research consortium formed at the University of Toronto to study all aspects of the biogeography and prehistoric cultures of the Old Crow region and adjacent parts of what is sometimes called Beringia. Studies in progress range in scope from archaeology, geology and palaeontology to botany and analysis of bone mineral

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with nuclear reactors. This research is supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the Donner Canadian Foundation, and the University of Toronto. Field and laboratory studies are carried out in collaboration with the Bering Refugium Project, led by members of the National Museums and the Geological Survey of Canada.

For more information contact M. Jacques Cinq-Mars, Associate Director, Northern Yukon Research Programme (416- 978-2315).

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W.N. Irving
Director
Northern Yukon
Research Programme

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